The Man in the Stone House

By FREEMAN TILDEN

Illustration by George E. Wolfe

THE Mudges had just sat down to breakfast—which was always early in that house—when the telephone rang. Louise answered, but the call was for Ezra.

"What?" cracked out the old man, immediately he had put the receiver to his ear. "*What's that?* . . . You don't tell me! . . . How much? . . . No! . . . You don't tell me, now! . . . And the other money too, eh? Well, well!"

"*That's* the end of *that*," announced Ezra triumphantly to the women at the table. "*Now* I guess he'll wish he'd taken a little advice."

"Who? What is it?" asked the women.

"Eadbrook," replied Ezra.

"What—has happened, dad?" said Louise, going white and half rising.

"Nothing, except that they blew open the safe in his store last night or this morning sometime, and cleaned him out."

"Oh—is that all?" said the girl, sinking back into her chair.

"Is that all! Isn't that enough? Cleaned him right up dry. Didn't leave a postage stamp. What did ye think it might be, anyway?"

"I thought it might be an accident," replied Louise. "If it's only money—"

"Only money!" cried Ezra, not intending to have the luster of his information tarnished. "Only money! It wasn't only his money. Every cent belonging to the Lunatics' Association has gone with his. The young fool drawed all the money that was to boost Boxton, and make a bigger 'n' better 'n' busier 'n' what-not Boxton—and put it into his safe. And it's gone."

Aunt Lyddy shivered. "That's terrible, Ezra," she said.

"Well, he wouldn't mind what I told him—and now look where he is," Ezra replied, attacking his breakfast.

"Did they say—where he is?" asked Louise.

"He's disappeared—flew the coop. He waited just long enough to tell Joel Tibb that he's put his shoe store in the hands of the Lunatics' Club to be sold at auction and turn everything he owns over to 'em, and then he went—and they're looking for him now."

LOUISE said nothing. Suddenly she rose from the table and left the room. They heard her running upstairs.

"Now what's the matter with *her?*" said Ezra.

Aunt Lyddy looked at her husband a moment before she replied. Finally she said calmly: "Perhaps 'twould have been just as well to have broken it more gently, Ezra."

Ezra had dashed down his coffee and risen, and was pacing up and down the floor, hands behind his back, shaking his head and indulging in muttered remarks of gratification. He stopped to reply:

"Nonsense! Didn't I give 'em both a chance? Didn't I tell young Eadbrook how it stood? He might have had everything his own way. He might have been the biggest man in these parts if he showed the head for it. Now look at him. Busted! Worse'n busted!"

Fifteen minutes passed. Aunt Lyddy carried the dishes out to the kitchen and washed them hurriedly. As soon as she found the opportunity, she went upstairs and knocked gently at the door of Louise's room. The girl opened it. She was in her riding habit.

"Why, Louise, where are you going?"

"I don't know. I'm going to find Walter. Now, please, Aunt Lyddy, don't make a fuss about it."

"I don't mean to make a fuss," replied the little old woman. "I say go ahead. That's what I'd do, if I were as young as you. Wait a minute, Louise. Have you got any money?"

"I've got a little. I won't need much."

"You don't know," replied Aunt Lyddy, dashing into her own room. She came back with several bank-notes. "Put these away where you won't lose them," she ordered. "Give me a kiss. Now go along. If Ezra says anything, tell him you're going out for a ride. That's true. And don't forget to telephone me if—"

"I won't," promised Louise, putting her arms around the old woman's neck and hugging her wildly.

ONCE on the back of her little bay mare and out of sight of the big stone house, Louise began to consider.

"First I'd better go up to the station," she thought, "and see if he has taken a train. If he has, it won't be any use."

The station agent shook his head. "No; I'd have seen him if he'd been here."

For a moment she halted.

"Walter isn't running away," she told herself. "He isn't that sort. He's all broken up and nervous, and he's gone out somewhere to think it over. It isn't likely he would hire a horse and carriage. He must be walking. But which road?"

Roads ran out from Boxton in a dozen directions. Not only that: there were cross-roads, that formed a network like a spider's web. Louise remembered reading in one of the town reports that there were 158 miles of road, altogether, in the town. It seemed quite hopeless.

Yet—there was one road that was different from all the rest. That was the one that she and Walter had so often walked on Sunday afternoons. They had told each other many times that it was the most beautiful place in the world. Grass had grown up in the middle, between the deep ruts, except for long stretches that ran through the woods. Few carriages ever passed over it in these days.

Something came out of the girl's intuition—out of that storehouse of intimate woman-knowledge that has never been plumbed—and told her the way to go.

Once on the old road, Louise flicked the mare gently with the whip. A half-grown rabbit darted out from the underbrush, bobbed along in front of the horse for a hundred feet, and vanished. A woodchuck squealed, unseen, somewhere on the roadside, and rattled noisily away. The sky was pure overhead. It was still so early that the sun had not parched the freshness of the air. On the grass-grown middle of the highway the mare's feet made so little noise that only the lonesome note of a hermit-thrush seemed to travel along with them.

Suddenly Louise reined in the mare so quickly that she nearly lost her balance. Dismounting, she led her horse into a little bower of shrubs, patted the moist flank soothingly a moment, and then stepped out into the road again.

A FEW hundred feet ahead, a man was sitting on a log. His elbows were resting on his knees, and his chin was supported by his hands. He seemed not to have heard the approach of the horse. She was not near enough to see the man's face. It was not necessary.

She came near enough almost to reach out and touch him on the shoulder, and he had not looked up.

"Walter!" she said softly. Her breath was coming fast.

He raised his head and took off his hat, and the first thing she noticed was a red brand along his forehead where the hat-band had been pressed too tightly. He spoke:

"I heard you coming. I knew it was you. You've heard?"

Louise did not reply at once. She sat down upon the log beside him and took his hand.

"I knew you'd be here—out on *our* road," she whispered.

Then there was a silence.

"Your father knows?" Eadbrook asked finally.

"Yes. Some one telephoned the first thing this morning. That's how I happened to come here. I thought you might—need me. I knew you hadn't run away. I knew you just wanted to get out somewhere and think. And so I came."

She rose and stood before him, and put both her hands on his shoulders. As he looked up, she bent over and looked deep into his eyes.

"I sha'n't let her have you!" she said, between her teeth.

"'Her have me,'" repeated Eadbrook, with an expression that indicated his surprise. Then he understood that her mind was far from the robbery, and that she was referring to the scene in the doorway the night before.

"Lou," he said, standing up and facing her, "there won't be any misunderstanding about *her* when I tell you what I'm going to tell. You heard that everything is gone—the Boosters' money and all? Yes, it's all gone. Perhaps you thought it was hard luck for me, Lou, or something like that? It wasn't. It's just the way they punish fools. Sit down, Lou, and I'll tell you."

SHE heard him to the end without an interruption or even a change of expression, save that a deeper sympathy was reflected on her face. There was a pause, and then she said to him:

"Walter, I'm almost glad she turned out bad." She smiled as she said it. "Isn't that like a woman?"

"I'm not thinking of her," said the man. "I've been wondering—I've had wild notions that they might get Catorno or her. They must have been working together. But our county officers don't amount to much, and the chances are a hundred to one against finding the money on them, anyway. No; it's my finish, so far as the store is concerned, Lou. I can say that coldly, because I've had time to think."

"What shall we do?" asked the girl.

"*We?*" he replied. "*We'll* do nothing. Lou. *I'm* going to—"

"Walter," she cried, sensing his meaning instantly, "what do you mean? Aren't we going to stand together in this? Aren't we—"

"In God's name, Lou," he replied, "don't make it any harder for me now. I love you a thousand times more than I

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